DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 221 861 CS 207 172

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TITLE Collaborative Learning: A Means of Improving Students' Exam Writing.
PUB DATE Jul 82
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the National Endowment for the Humanities/Beaver College Summer Institute for Writing in the Humanities (Glenside, PA, July 1982).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Essay Tests; *Group Activities; Higher Education; *Humanities Instruction; Inservice Teacher Education; *Instructional Improvement; Objective Tests; *Peer Evaluation; Student Development; *Student Teacher Relationship; Teacher Attitudes; Teacher Workshops; Teaching Methods; Testing Problems; Writing Evaluation; *Writing Instruction

ABSTRACT

To revitalize humanities courses and to improve student thinking, a workshop for faculty members of the University of the Sacred Heart (Puerto Rico) will cover two models of collaborative learning, collaborative group work and peer criticism. In collaborative group work, students should be able to learn how to reach a consensus about a specific task, to generate ideas, and to share those ideas with other members of the group without the direct intervention of the teacher. In peer criticism, students will learn how to evaluate others' work, make judgments based on facts, and to express their opinions in coherent and persuasive ways. Exercises on finding the organizing principle of a reading assignment will improve students' reading ability. The last part of the workshop will focus on developing teachers' attitudes toward students' work that will encourage, not discourage, improved student writing. Faculty members will be surveyed both immediately after the workshop and at the end of the following semester to see how many of these methods they actually use and what suggestions they have formulated based upon their experiences. (JL)

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Collaborative Learning: A Means of Improving Students' Exam Writing

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CS 207 172

ACKNOLEDGEMENTS

I want to thank all Institute participants for the stimulus and backing that each one of them gave me during this four weeks, specially Ellery Sedgwick who kindly read and commented about my paper. To Charles Kerlin, my heartfelt thanks for his encouragement.

I also wish to thank Peggy Horodowich for revising my paper, for her helpful comments and for calming my fears and anxiety about speaking English before an audience since my native language is Spanish.

Finally I want to thank, specially, my colleague Myrsa Landrón who helped me to clarify and shape my ideas. This experience gave me the opportunity of discovering in Myrsa a great and true friend.

COLLABORATIVE LEARNING:
A MEANS OF IMPROVING STUDENTS' EXAM WRITING

Puerto Rico is a very small island but with a very large population. As the population grows, the number of students in our school increases. This forces teachers to give more objective tests and to require less written assignments. As a consequence the students almost never write in their classes.

When they go to college, they find that what has been an unusual situation during their school years is an everyday event in college. The students find that they do not have the skills to achieve college work successfully.

College professors in other disciplines think that teaching the skills of reading and writing are the exclusive responsibility of humanities teachers and the professors of humanities tend to think that elementary and high school teachers should have the responsibility. We expect that students who come to a university should be prepared to do good work according to the old standards of the university.

I teach in a university which is not the exception to this problem. It accepts students from all schools, many of whom are not what we used to call college material. Besides that problem, I have found that Humanities, for reasons that I will explain later, have been relegated to an inferior place.

The Humanities Department of my university, offers four majors: Spanish, English, French and History, but there are not many

students in any of these majors. Many of the courses that we offer are required for all students. The students go to those classes as if it were a sacrifice that they have to offer to the gods to obtain a diploma.

Humanities teachers must face the realities then, that education is not what it used to be; people in general, do not care anymore about the Humanities. This situation has two consequences: Students are interested in courses that prepare them for specific jobs; they are no longer seeking a liberal education background; therefore, Humanities Departments are weaker than other departments. Universities have to function to remediate students.

In order to solve this problem we must realize that we have to give a new vision to education in which it accomplishes the new social needs but without forgetting the importance of forming individuals. We also have to deal with the reluctance of students and in some cases professors in other disciplines who consider the humanities courses as useless courses. What we must not let them forget is that no one can learn and do a good job if he does not know how to think, read or write. These are the keys to any door.

My purpose here is not to criticize teachers or even students. I know that there are many teachers who are concerned and worried about the problem. They know that there is something wrong and that they must do something about it, but what?

Before I came here I thought that our students' attitudes were only the problem of my country and, specifically, of my university. Now I have found that this is not true. I found in this Institute professors who come from all over the United States, from large and small universities or schools, and everyone has the same problem. I was deeply concerned with the educational problem that exists in Puerto Rico, and I was seeking a solution to it. Nothing worked, no matter what I did. When I saw the Institute's brochure, I thought that maybe there I would find a solution. I have to confess I did not know what writing across the curriculum, course clusters or writing to learn meant. Besides, I was seeking an easy solution, a formula to solve the problem. In the first week of the Institute I realized that there is no easy solution, but there is hope.

I feel that this solution cannot only be mine, that I have to communicate what I have learned and the hope and enthusiasm that you have given me. The best way to accomplish that is through a workshop and, this is my project.

I have been anxious these five weeks because I understand that this solution and the workshop implies a lot of work, and I am almost sure I will need to persuade everybody that this solution is workable.

The audience of the workshop is going to be the Humanities Faculty because they should be in the vanguard; the initiative of a larger project for the whole university should come from the Humanities professors.

The first part of the workshop will start when I return to my university. In order to make my project successful, I have to convince my colleagues that writing is a way of learning. To achieve that, I will have informal chats with them at lunch time, during office hours and whenever the occasion arises. Then I will ask for their help for the second part of the workshop. If I make them part of my project, they will see that what I am going to offer them is valuable.

The second part of the workshop will be held in the spring semester, and it will last two days. The main goal of this second part will be to improve student's writing in exams.

Until now, professors have been giving objective exams for several reasons: First, because of their overload, - we have large classes with 45 to 50 students in each and five- three credit courses each semester. Second, students make better exams and get better grades in multiple choice tests because they do not know how to organize their ideas and express them either orally or in writing. Besides those reasons, professors get tired of correcting exams that do not say anything. A common complaint is: "Those exams are so bad that I do not know how to grade them". The problem becomes a vicious circle.

If we find a way to improve students' writing, I know there will be no objection to giving tests with essay questions accounting for at least 40% of the grade. However, the methods or techniques used to solved the problem cannot give more work to the teachers. The better way, as I see it now, to achieve our

purpose without additional work is to use collaborative learning. This is why two sessions of the workshop are going to be focus on that technique.

The two models of collaborative learning that can be used used in our situation are collaborative group work and peer criticism. The other two sessions of the workshop would include exercises to find the organizing principle and give teachers practice in evaluating essays and commenting on drafts to be revised.

Through collaborative group work students should be able to learn without the direct intervention of the teacher; they should be able to reach a consensus about a specific task. When each group reports its consensus through one of the group members, there should be a discussion about the differences in opinion among groups. While working in groups, students should learn how to generate ideas and share them with other members of the group. In order to share their ideas and to persuade other members, they have to organize and express those ideas clearly.

In the second model, peer criticism, the students learn how to evaluate others work. The teacher should divide the class in pairs and give students a guide to criticize others' work. This exercise shows students how to make judgment based on facts, not on their preferences. The reader, also, has to give proof of his judgment and should express his opinion in a coherent and persuasive

way. The writer can gain new ideas about his work and how the work affects his audience. This method should give students self-confidence in evaluating their own work and cause them to be selective about the judgment of others.

In addition, the teacher is not the first one to read the students' papers; by the time that paper gets to the teacher others have read it, and evaluated it. The teacher does not need to revise each one of the drafts the student has written.

Many of our students do not know how to read effectively. Few can tell an instructor what a reading assignment is about. They have read but they do not know what they have read. With exercises on finding the organizing principle, they will learn how to siff through information to uncover the main points.

After giving students the list of items to find the organizing principle, the teacher can ask them to write down a paragraph explaining the organizing principle. Later each one of them can read aloud what they have written.

The last part of the workshop should be focused on teachers revisions of students' writing. As we have learn in the Institute, the teacher can stimulate students' writing or can kill forever that impulse. This session will focus on developing necessary teachers' attitudes toward students' work.

All these methods that I have chosen as topics for the workshop have educational benefits: They stimulate students' writing. They help to improve students' basic skills in thinking, reading and

writing. They do not give additional home work to the teachers. And, students do not assume a passive role in their learning anymore but an active one. If students are always reading carefully, talking with each other about what they have learned, and later, writing on it and revising what they have written, they, definitely, are going to write better exams.

These methods of collaborative group work and peer criticism will precede the final stage that will be the test, which can be the only work in which the student is going to be graded.

There will be two kinds of evaluation of the workshops. After they are finished every professor will be asked to answer a questionnaire to see if the workshops have been worthwhile. But the most important part of the evaluation will take place at the end of the semester when they will be asked to answer a questionnaire to see how many of them have used any of the above methods, which ones they have used, and whether they have suggestions based on their experience.

I hope that our work will not end there. I am expecting that by the end of the semester I will have a lot of professors who will be excited about this project and willing to cooperate to offer these workshops to the whole university and to our high school.

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